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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 003593

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [KPAL](#) [JO](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: GOI SENDING MIXED MESSAGES ON MUGHRABI GATE

REF: A. TEL AVIV 3587
 1B. TEL AVIV 2326
 1C. TEL AVIV 455
 1D. TEL AVIV 441
 1E. JERUSALEM 2584
 1F. JERUSALEM 2199
 1G. JERUSALEM 1570
 1H. JERUSALEM 252
 1I. AMMAN 585
 1J. PARIS 2484
 1K. PARIS 2371
 1L. PARIS 779
 1M. STATE 15177

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Following press reports this week that on November 29 the GOI ordered the resumption of excavation work at the Mughrabi Gate access point for the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, Poloff contacted PMO Deputy Foreign Policy Advisor Ari Varon and the chief archeologist at the site, John Seligman (Seligman's comments are reported ref. A) for reactions. Both argued that despite the November 29 GOI decision, there were no plans to resume excavations prior to the approval of construction plans for the new Mughrabi Gate access ramp. The Jordanian Poloff in charge of Jerusalem issues stressed that his government had not been informed prior to the November 29 decision, and said the Jordanians were planning to work with the Waqf and UNESCO to develop an alternate set of construction plans for the new ramp. The MFA's point person for UNESCO issues reported that Israeli World Heritage Committee Chairman Michael Turner is planning to host an unofficial technical-level meeting in Jerusalem on January 13 so that Jordanian, UNESCO and Waqf officials can hear about the Mughrabi ramp project firsthand from the project architect and others. END SUMMARY.

PMO: No Plans to Resume Excavations

12. (C) Ari Varon, Deputy Foreign Policy Advisor to PM Olmert, told Poloff December 20 that nothing had changed with regard to the GOI's position on the Mughrabi Gate, regardless of the Cabinet's November 29 decision "instructing the Antiquities Authority to continue to operate in the area of the Mughrabi bridge with a view to bringing the work to a conclusion in the shortest time possible while maintaining full transparency and cooperating with the relevant parties." Varon explained that the excavations were halted last summer not only because of the sensitivity of the site, but also because it was unclear who had ultimate authority over the issue - the GOI or Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupoliansky. Varon said the GOI's decision in July to form a Ministerial Committee to deal with the issue and the November 29 Cabinet decision (approving language originally tabled by the Ministerial Committee on September 25) were taken in order to assert the GOI's authority over the site. He confirmed the

IAA's understanding (Ref. A) that the Prime Minister's Office has not ordered the IAA to resume excavations, and has no intention of doing so anytime soon, despite the contrary language in the November 29 Cabinet decision.

13. (C) Asked whether the GOI had briefed others, especially Jordan and the Waqf, before the November 29 Cabinet decision, Varon responded that there had been no need since the November decision had changed nothing. Poloff suggested that with rumors flying in response to the GOI's confusing and unannounced November 29 decision, it would be a good idea to reach out to interested parties to brief them on developments and to provide reassurances that there would be no surprises.

Jordanian Embassy: Not Consulted, Not Happy, Making Own Plans

14. (C) Asem Adadneh, who covers Jerusalem and Peace Process issues at the Jordanian Embassy, told Poloff December 18 that the GOI did not consult with Jordan about its November 29 decision, nor did it inform the Jordanians after the fact. Instead, the Jordanians learned about it from Akiva Eldar's Ha'aretz article on December 17. Adadneh said the GOJ was also "not happy" about the timing of the November 29 decision, which came just days after Annapolis and which was reported for the first time during the Paris donors conference. He said his Embassy had been in touch with the PMO and MFA to clarify the story, but had not yet received a satisfying response about the GOI's intentions. "They said nothing has changed and nothing would be done without consulting us," Adadneh said, noting that such a response was not reassuring given the GOI's poor record of transparency on the issue. He recalled how "shocked" the Jordanians were

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when the IAA started work at the site last February (refs. D, H and I) after the GOI had promised Jordan there would be no surprises on the Mughrabi issue.

15. (C) Adadneh also noted that Jordan was working with the Waqf and UNESCO to hold a trilateral meeting at the technical level in January to develop alternate plans for a new access ramp at the Mughrabi Gate. (Note: With Israel planning to host Jordan, UNESCO and Waqf technical officials for Mughrabi consultations on January 13 (see below), it seems likely that the trilateral meeting Adadneh described is being arranged in order to agree on an alternate concept for the Mughrabi ramp ahead of the larger meeting with the Israelis.)

MFA: Technical Experts to Host Informal Meeting

16. (C) MFA International Organizations Department Director Orli Gil told Poloff December 19 that the MFA was trying to arrange an informal technical-level meeting on January 13 in Jerusalem with Jordan, UNESCO and Waqf officials to review the GOI plans for the Mughrabi ramp and to allay concerns about the new ramp's impact on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and neighboring antiquities. (Note: Israeli plans for the new access ramp are described ref. B.) Gil stressed that while the MFA was informally helping to arrange the meeting, no GOI officials would be present at the meeting itself. Instead, the Israeli side will be represented by Israeli World Heritage Committee Chairman Prof. Michael Turner. According to Gil, the day-long program will include a tour of the Mughrabi excavations site and briefings by IAA archeologists, the Jerusalem District Planner, the Jerusalem City Engineer, and the project architect.

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JONES